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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEBRAN BASSIL DEFENDS HIZBALLAH, CONDEMNS
MARCH 14 LEADERS

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a confrontational lunch discussion, the FPM's Gebran Bassil -- Michel Aoun's son-in-law and close advisor -- insisted that his party is transforming Hizballah even as it uses it to bring about a national unity government and a slate of needed reforms. He suggested Pierre Gemayel's assassination was a March 14 inside job, and singled out the Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, and Walid Jumblatt as the true "Pro-Syrians" in Lebanon. Asked about disarming Hizballah, Bassil went back on much of what FPM had claimed in the past, making it clear that the return of the Shebaa Farms and of Lebanese prisoners in Israel were no longer Hizballah's sole conditions for giving up its heavy weapons. Bassil predicted 200,000 FPM supporters would come out for the December 10 rally, and while at the table entertained a proposal from Hizballah to sponsor a mass in Martyr's Square. Confronted with the popular view that General Aoun is obsessed with obtaining the presidency even at the cost of ruining Lebanon, and that once installed at Baabda he will have no power next to that of a triumphant Hizballah, Bassil became visibly angry. He described these views as those of March 14 leaders only and heaped venom on them, with an anger that was not just for show. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Polchief lunched with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) official and Michel Aoun son-in-law Gebran Bassil December 8. In a conversation that occasionally yielded more heat than light, Polchief warned Bassil of the dangerous path Hizballah was leading FPM down. Bassil sheltered himself behind his party's multitude of grievances against March 14 leaders and USG policy. Bassil traveled with more security than usual and at one point suggested a last-minute change to the lunch venue for security purposes. He also announced that he had been dieting, losing four kilos in a week from his already-small, Napoleonic frame.

CURBING HIZBALLAH

¶3. (C) Pulling out a translation of Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's December 7 speech,

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Polchief pointed out several instances of Nasrallah's rhetorical lunacy and asked how Bassil expected FPM's (mostly

Christian) base to react. Calling Siniora and his cabinet "Zionists," accusing the GOL of being run by the US Embassy, claiming that the Israel-Hizballah War was started by the United States at Siniora's behest -- these were never the beliefs of General Aoun, he added, so how could such language be accepted by his followers? Are not FPM voters concerned about the General's alliance? (Polchief used the term "alliance" deliberately to provoke Bassil -- the General was as recently as last month angrily denying that Hizballah is his "ally.") Bassil, in characteristic style, would not answer the question directly, but insisted that Aoun continues to enjoy by far the highest popularity among Lebanese Christians (a claim which a Statistics Lebanon poll to be published in al-Nahar on Monday will question, since the newest poll shows Samir Ja'ja' now statistically neck-to-neck with Aoun regarding popularity among Christians).

14. (C) As for Hizballah's hyperbole, Bassil claimed that he and the General had consistently rejected the party's rants against the United States and refused to allow such rhetoric to be used in their presence. FPM is America's best friend in Lebanon and always watching out for US interests, he repeated -- a frequent Aoun-Bassil flourish. Polchief noted that Nasrallah's use of such vitriolic language against GOL leaders and the US Embassy could be setting them and us up for terrorist attacks; Nasrallah's rhetoric is designed to convince extremists that the only solution for Lebanon's problems is to eliminate us.

15. (C) FPM's "Gradual Process" policy, Bassil explained, was showing results and reforming Hizballah's behavior. The party no longer spoke of liberating Palestine, Bassil pointed out (though Nasrallah's latest speech was full of venom for Israel). Furthermore, Hizballah has begun displaying the Lebanese flag at demonstrations. Polchief countered that if

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Hizballah is tempering its rhetoric it is all for show, to avoid alienating Lebanon's Christians at a time when it needs them for cover as it assails the GOL. (Comment: The Hizballah-FPM decision to fly the Lebanese flag exclusively at its current sit-in may be a way to obscure what many suspect: that most of the demonstrators are Hizballahis, not middle-class Aounists whose professional lives might prevent them from spending days or weeks in the Square. End Comment.)

16. (C) Hizballah is an honest interlocutor, Bassil insisted; they mean what they say. And Hizballah's July attack on Israel, Polchief asked? Had they not given assurances that Lebanon would have a quiet summer? Bassil said to look at what Hizballah had told the Lebanese people rather than what they said at the National Dialogue table. Hizballah announced its intention to kidnap Israeli soldiers and even launched a failed attempt, he pointed out, in January 2006. It was a mistake for them to start a war with Israel in July, but at least they proved their honesty.

FPM AT DECEMBER 10 RALLY

17. (C) At one point during the lunch, Bassil received a call, presumably from a Hizballah operative. After hanging up, he told Polchief "they want us to hold a mass in St. George's Cathedral in Martyr's Square on Sunday" to accompany the mass rally that Hizballah and Aoun had called for that day. Bassil pointed out that Hizballah-affiliated al-Manar television had broken precedent and broadcast live a mass sponsored by Aoun the previous Sunday, and had estimated that 70,000 had attended the mass and the General's speech following it. When asked how many FPM supporters would come to the Square for the December 10 rally, Bassil said the party was expecting 200,000 supporters. Polchief needled Bassil: "You don't have that many." Bassil responded "how then did we get 400,000 votes in the last election?"

GEMAYEL ASSASSINATION

18. (C) When asked about Pierre Gemayel's November 21 assassination, Bassil pretended to ponder for a moment and then gave the standard conspiracy line -- that those who stood most to gain from his killing were March 14 leaders, and that we should therefore look to them as the top suspects. He pointed out that the assassination had brought international suspicion on Damascus and had forestalled the demonstrations the opposition had planned for that week. Bassil also claimed that FPM headquarters had been attacked within an hour after the killing, timing which he called suspicious, and he believed the pulling-down and torching of the Aoun-for-President posters in central Beirut had been coordinated beforehand also.

BISHOPS' STATEMENT

19. (C) Polchief asked Bassil why Aoun was so quick to respond positively to the Maronite Bishops' statement of December 6, which appeared to call for the current March 14-dominated Chamber of Deputies to replace President Lahoud, virtually guaranteeing that Michel Aoun would never be elected president. Bassil advised Polchief to check the wording and sequence of the Statement carefully. He claimed that the Bishops meant that following the replacement of the cabinet with a technocratic caretaker government, which would be entrusted to reform Lebanon's parliamentary electoral system, parliamentary elections should immediately follow. The Bishops' Statement text calling for Lahoud's replacement falls after that dealing with electoral reform, he claimed, and that order implies that the new president should be chosen by a new, and presumably more pro-Syrian, parliament.

HIZBALLAH -- NEVER TO DISARM?

110. (C) FPM officials, including Bassil, have long maintained that one of the major achievements of Michel Aoun's February 2006 Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah was to obtain Hizballah's commitment to disarm upon the fulfillment of two conditions only: return of the Shebaa Farms and of Lebanese

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prisoners in Israel. Polchief asked whether Hizballah's conditions for disarmament remained the same now. Bassil dodged the question: "We haven't talked to them about that lately."

111. (C) However later in the conversation Bassil linked Hizballah disarmament to the establishment of "a real state, a real government, and a real parliament" and to a "national defense strategy in which Hizballah will be integrated into the Lebanese military." Polchief commented that Hizballah had appeared in public speeches to set out even more conditions which would have to be fulfilled in order for it to disarm, such as an end to corruption in Lebanon, and speculated that Hizballah would always find a reason to keep its weapons. Bassil responded, absurdly, that every militia in history that has agreed to give up its weapons has been attacked and wiped out militarily. Polchief countered that several Lebanese militias disarmed following the Ta'if Agreement and that they continued on as political organizations. As he usually does when facing a logical dead end, Bassil fell back to arguing over history, insisting that "your friends" Hariri and Jumblatt protected Hizballah's possession of heavy weapons for years.

112. (C) Bassil then changed the subject, asking whether if Hizballah disarmed the USG would engage with them. Polchief responded that it would be hard to imagine the United States sitting down across the table from the people who bombed the Marine barracks in 1983 and the US Embassy in 1983 and 1984, and who kidnapped and killed Americans in subsequent years. "You're right," Bassil allowed.

¶13. (C) Polchief asked Bassil whether FPM still stood for a pro-independence, anti-Syrian line. Bassil responded positively and swore that the party is receiving no support from any outside source nor do any of its operatives visit Syria. How do its supporters view Bassil, then, when he appears at a podium in the Square with such avowed pro-Syrians as Druze opposition leader Talal Arslan? In typical fashion, Bassil would not answer this directly but asked, "Who was close to and practically part of Syria for 15 years? Rafiq Hariri and the people who are now running the country." Polchief responded that Hariri's assassination had indeed resulted in some drastic role reversals among Lebanon's political parties.

¶14. (C) On Hizballah's support from the outside, and whether that should be considered a corrupting Syrian influence, Bassil shrugged and said that Hizballah had never taken anything from Lebanese. So what if they take Iranian money and distribute it to Lebanese affected by the war? Besides, he added, Hariri and Siniora receive money from Saudi Arabia; why do we not condemn them by the same standard?

AND IF AOUN BECOMES PRESIDENT...

¶15. (C) Polchief told Bassil that even if Aoun makes it to Baabda, he will be powerless; Hizballah will run the country. (Losing his usual affability, Bassil got visibly angry and stayed that way for the rest of the encounter.) The Shia are supporting Aoun because of shared goals, Polchief said, whereas Aoun enjoys the support of some, but not all Christians and very few Sunnis. But when Aoun, if he becomes President, begins to pressure Hizballah to disarm, Hizballah could drop FPM. Bassil responded, "Let them drop us. We don't need them."

¶16. (C) Everyone has been telling us that Aoun is obsessed with the presidency and seeks it even at the cost of destroying the country, Polchief said. "Who says that?" asked Bassil with an incredulous look. When Polchief replied that the vast majority of our interlocutors held that opinion, Bassil responded "that's because you only talk to March 14 supporters." (Comment: It is indeed almost every interlocutor, pro-government, pro-opposition and in between, who describe Aoun as having an obsession with becoming president. Bassil's prevarication is unsurprising, however, as he and other FPM leaders try to maintain the fiction that

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Aoun is still overwhelmingly popular among Christians. End Comment.)

HATRED FOR SINIORA, JUMBLATT AND HARIRI

¶17. (C) The one thing about Bassil's performance at lunch that seemed to be completely honest was the visceral hatred he displayed for the March 14 leaders. At one point, Bassil's eyes narrowed and his lips curled as he uttered the name "Hariri" -- this was not theatrics. The current GOL has done nothing to carry out economic or political reform, he pointed out. Polchief responded that the government and its leaders may not be perfect, but that much of its record could be attributed to its being saddled with President Lahoud and a perpetual political crisis. "They cancelled the Constitutional Court -- would you accept that someone abolishes the US Supreme Court?" Bassil countered. "This is a government that you tried to join last year," Polchief pointed out. "And we are still," Bassil said, via an expanded cabinet. He did not reply, though, when Polchief suggested the expanded cabinet might be no more than a mechanism for bringing the cabinet down.

